

POPULAR MYTHOLOGY, especially in liberal quarters, invariably casts the Central Intelligence Agency in a villainous role in Vietnam. But in fact, the CIA has consistently been the most objective organization functioning out there—particularly in assessing the political realities of the war.

In other words, the CIA has been generally telling it like it is rather than dishing up optimistic reports calculated to please and appease the Establishment in Saigon and Washington.

For that reason, the agency has incurred the envy of State Department officials, the wrath of senior American military officers and something less than full White House support. And, as a consequence, its pres-

ence in Vietnam has been gradually reduced.

There are virtually no CIA men now working at the district and village levels. Instead, the estimated 50 agency operatives currently stationed outside Saigon are assigned mainly to provincial headquarters, where their jobs are largely ritualistic.

The program designed to identify and uproot the Vietcong political network in the countryside, known as Operation Phoenix, has been taken out of CIA hands and put under U.S. military auspices. So has the training of the Saigon government's so-called "revolutionary development" cadres.

WHETHER these programs would have fared better under the CIA is a matter of doubt, since South Vietnamese officials both in Saigon and in rural areas either disregard the importance of the Communists' political infrastructure or are bitterly making local accommodations with the enemy.

But as run by the American military, pacification appears to be making little real headway.

President's favorite Vietnam

One of the CIA techniques that has never quite satisfied the Establishment has been a tendency to produce qualitative intelligence—anecdotal, descriptive information often too fuzzy to be fed into computers. The Pentagon, in contrast, prefers statistics that can adorn graphs and flip-charts.

In the opinion of many Vietnam specialists, it was the military's quantitative approach that repeatedly created the illusory impression that the war was being won.

The military has also tended to paint a rosy picture of the Vietnam situation in order to bulwark its claims to have registered significant battlefield gains. With less need to justify itself, the CIA has tried to be more level in its appraisals.

A GOOD EXAMPLE of the kind of frustrations the CIA has encountered was described by Neil Sheehan in a recent New York Times dispatch disclosing that the agency had been rebuffed in its attempts to warn the President that more than 30,000 Communist agents have infiltrated various

South Vietnamese government departments.

Though White House sources confirmed the existence of the CIA document, they dismissed it as exaggerated and "overly pessimistic"—apparently because it differed from the more optimistic accounts assuring the President that his policies are resulting in progress.

Similarly, studies undertaken with CIA field participation in two key South Vietnamese provinces not long ago have reportedly been shelved because their findings failed to substantiate military affirmations that the Vietcong in those places have been put out of action.

According to these classified studies, Vietcong political activists are still very much alive in those provinces, even though they have been compelled by increased Saigon government activity to operate more covertly at the present time.

The studies estimate, therefore, that the Communists could make a considerable showing in the two provinces even in a free election if they had eight or nine months during a cease-fire in which to reassemble their apparatus and resume their efforts to influence the local population.

IMPLICIT in this investigation is the suggestion that President Nguyen Van Thieu's Saigon regime is at its strongest point at the moment, and might perform relatively well were a political settlement initiated quickly.

Moreover, the studies recommend that preparations be made for such a settlement by strengthening the regime's village political structures and, among other things, eliminating the ludicrous quota system under which government officials are required to arrest a designated number of Communist suspects each month.

Judging from the fate of these studies, both Washington and Saigon are evidently still persuaded that guns rather than negotiations are the answer in Vietnam. So instead of being hailed as a hero, as in the fable, the little boy who honestly declared the emperor to be naked is being administered a swift kick in the pants.



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CIA Loses Stature in War

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